

Church commemorates those who died in East Timor's violence

By Stephen Steele, Catholic News Service

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MALIANA, East Timor (CNS) -- A month of mourning continued in East Timor, with church commemorations honoring those who died in last year's post-election violence.

In Maliana, near the border with West Timor, about 2,500 people gathered outside the former Indonesian police station Sept. 9, one year after a massacre of Timorese men, women and children occurred there.

In southwest Suai, some 10,000 people gathered for Mass Sept. 6 celebrated by Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo of Dili, East Timor, at the site of one of the most horrific massacres in the country's history.

Father Sancho Amaral, who celebrated the Mass in Maliana, said those who were murdered in last year's violence resembled Christ on the cross.

"The people who died here are martyrs. They prepared the way for us, for our independence, just the way Christ died on the cross for our freedom," he said.

East Timor descended into violence and anarchy in the weeks following an Aug. 30, 1999, U.N.-sponsored referendum in which the people voted for independence. Most of East Timor's infrastructure was destroyed by paramilitaries and retreating Indonesian troops.

In Suai, Bishop Belo urged the people to remember their "obligation of building an independent East Timor."

"The only way we can honor our martyrs is by rebuilding East Timor," he said. "We feel sad and we cry because we lost our loved ones. But remember that Jesus has prepared a place for them."

In front of the outdoor altar prepared for the Mass was a monument containing the names of 151 people killed in the church compound last year. Church officials stressed that these were only the victims identified: The death toll is believed to be much higher, with many of the victims remaining unaccounted for.

Among those killed were the pastor, Father Hilario Madeira, and two assistants, Father Francisco Soares, and Jesuit Father Tarcisius Dewanto. Father Amaral's sister was killed at Suai.

Earlier, Bishop Belo spoke about the murdered priests.

"There are no special qualifications for being a priest. These were ordinary men who served the people and chose to die among them," he said.

The shadow of the facade of the unfinished new church, where the majority of victims were shot and hacked with machetes, cast down upon the mourners. Signs marked where the priests and others were killed, where their bodies were burned, and where a pile of victims' clothes were found.

A makeshift memorial was set up at the site where the bodies were burned. Widows, mothers and daughters, dressed in black, clutched photos of their loved ones and wailed as Bishop Belo paused in prayer before offering his blessing.

The bishop then walked to the site where the priests were gunned down. Father Dewanto was killed first, followed by Fathers Soares and Madeira.

Most of the church compound, including several school buildings, was destroyed by militias. Schools were rebuilt by a local nongovernmental organization. Parishioners constructed an open-air community center with a traditional Timorese thatch roof. At the center, community members are offered trauma and psychological counseling by a team led by Maryknoll Sister Charito Torrefranca.

Father Rene Manubag, who was installed as pastor of the Suai parish in November, said it was essential that the school and parish community be rebuilt in order for the community to regain some sense of normalcy.

"When you consider the amount of trouble that's been here, their recovery is quite remarkable. This community is resilient," Father Manubag said.

"The people are tired. They say, 'Please no more violence, no more tears and no more blood. We only want peace,'" the priest said.

"Peace is very important, but we need justice also -- not just for the people of Suai, but for all of East Timor," Father Manubag said.

Suai residents, weary from last year's violence, spoke of "forgetting the past."

Saturnino Amaral, a 50-year-old catechist, said, "If autonomy leaders want to come back and work for East Timor's improvement, it's OK."

Saturnino Amaral said he fled to the Suai church prior to last year's U.N.-sponsored referendum. He remained there until Sept. 3, when he was chased away by Father Madeira.

The priest "was carrying a stick and hitting us. He said 'Leave, leave. Go away. You don't belong here,'" Amaral said.

Amaral fled to the mountains, but many others stayed behind. He said Father Madeira was angry.

"We thought he had lost his mind. Later we understood he was trying to save our lives. Many people are alive today" because of Father Madeira, he said.

By March 1999, some 1,000 refugees had already fled to the church compound in Suai. By the August referendum, more than 4,000 people were there.

After an April attack at a Catholic Church in Liquisa, many priests persuaded people to flee to the mountains because the churches, the traditional place of sanctuary for the Timorese, could no longer offer protection.

Amaral said Father Madeira told the people if they did not flee to the mountains ``me and all of you will be killed by the militias."

Father Madeira ``was not afraid to die because he used to tell us that one day we will live again," Amaral said.